



Confucian Education as Civic Education

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What is the relation between Confucian education and civic education, especially in East Asian societies today?

The first part is on the nature and contents of Confucian education.

The second is on its suitability for civic education in democratic society.

I. Confucian Philosophy of Education

In Confucianism, education is usually understood in terms of “*jiao-xue* 教學.” *Jiao* mainly means teaching or educating others; *xue* means learning or educating oneself. It implies that learning is learning with others. Classic Confucian thinkers take education as a top priority in society.

I. Confucian Philosophy of Education

Learning to be human:

Book of Rites “On Learning” (*Xueji*):

Jade does not become a product without carving; people do not understand the Dao without learning. Therefore, the ancient kings placed *jiao* and *xue* as the top priority when they established the state and ruled the people (玉不琢，不成器；人不學，不知道。是故古之王者建國君民，教學為先;TTC 1521, my translation).

I. Confucian Philosophy of Education

Learning to be human:(學以成人)

“Learning” or “*xue* 學” is the first word in the *Analects*. Confucius is well-known for emphasizing learning in his teaching. He held the view that people are similar by nature but become different by learning and practice (性相近也，習相遠也 *Analects* 17.2).

I. Confucian Philosophy of Education

Learning to be human:(學以成人)

Mencius said, we are all born with the sprouts of humanity, but it is through cultivation we foster these “sprouts” into full growth (*Mencius* 2A6).



Love of learning 好學

In summarizing his major life stages, Confucius placed learning at the first, saying that “at fifteen I set my heart on learning” (*Analects* 2.4).

Standing for an important Confucian virtue, “love of learning” (*hao xue* 好學) appears repeatedly in the *Analects* (1.14, 5.15, 5.28, 6.3, 8.13, 11.7, 17.8, 19.5).

Commenting on his own strength, Confucius said, In a hamlet of ten households, there are bound to be those who are my equal in doing their best for others and in being trustworthy in what they say, but they are unlikely to love learning as much as I do. (*Analects* 5.28)

Features of Confucian Learning

First, Confucian learning is not merely about acquiring theoretical knowledge nor merely book-learning. Learning is about improving oneself to become a better person.

Second, learning is by no means a passive process of absorbing knowledge or information. It is rather an active endeavor to pursue knowledge and to acquire experience and skills.

Third, learning is not a one-directional affair between teacher and student; everyone should learn from others.



Teaching (*jiao* 教)

Confucius was among the first in history to advocate a policy of “education regardless of social classes (*you jiao wu lei* 有教無類)” (Analects 15.39).

Ancient Confucian Curriculum

“Six Arts” (六藝)

Rites (li 禮), music (yue 樂), archery (she 射), charioteering (yu 御), calligraphy (shū 書), mathematics (shù 數).



Ancient Confucian Curriculum

In *Analects* 7.25, Confucius's disciples classified his teaching into four categories:

1. cultural refinement (wen 文)
2. proper conduct (xing 行)
3. dedication (zhong 忠)
4. trustworthiness (xin 信)



Learning and Teaching

Learning (*xue*) and teaching (*jiao*) are the two aspects of the Confucian philosophy of education. Learning is for individual persons to absorb knowledge, to develop social skills, and to become virtuous. Teaching is for those with knowledge and experience to help others grow.

Learning without teaching becomes blind.
Teaching without learning is futile.



2. Confucian Values as Civic Values

From early on, Confucian education has been a form of “civic education” in the sense similar to the Greek idea of *paideia*.



2.° Confucian Values as Civic Values

If we wish to educate people for productive and responsible citizens of democratic societies, what should be taught?



Confucian Civic Education

In the Confucian view, moral education and civic education are consistent and are inseparable.

First, morality itself is relational. As long as one lives in society, there is no virtue that is completely isolated from others. In real life, so-called private virtues directly or indirectly affect a person's social participation, and hence have a public dimension to it.



Confucian Civic Education

Second, in democratic participation, and hence in civic education, we cannot separate the right from the good. As far as virtues are virtues, because they are conducive to a good life in the community in which one lives.

Ritual Propriety (li 禮) as Civility

Civility is among the first or primary virtues for democratic society (John Rawls 1996).

In this regard, the Confucian concept of ritual propriety (li禮) is directly relevant to civility.

Mencius maintains that the heart of deference (辭讓之心，禮之端也; 2A6) is the beginning of ritual propriety.

Greater Learning: Eight Goals

1. To investigate things 格物
2. To extend knowledge 致知
3. To clarify one's will 誠意)
4. To set one's heart right 正心
5. To cultivate one's person 修身
6. To regulate one's family 齊家
7. To manage the state 治國
8. To achieve world peace 平天下



Confucian Education in Multicultural Society

Confucian education is particularly suitable in working with other cultural traditions in promoting civic values in a religious-neutral way.

First, although Confucianism has its own religious components, it is not a religion. Confucianism is free of the most divisive element between religions.



Confucian Education in Multicultural Society

Second and more importantly, we should make a conceptual distinction between “Confucian values” in the sense of values that Confucians endorse on the one hand, and “Confucian values” in the sense of values possessed exclusively by Confucians.

Greater Learning: Eight Goals

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Confucian Education in Multicultural Society

Are all traditional Confucian values suitable for civic education in contemporary times? Evidently, some values as interpreted and even practiced in the past may no longer be relevant in contemporary societies.

e.g., Sexist values; extreme form of filial piety

Conclusion

Confucian education has been civic education in its own form. Today both the form and contents of Confucian education will have to change. Its basic ideas and fundamental values remain relevant to contemporary societies.



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